

## **Eyewitnesses to the Resurrection**

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Rich Nathan  
April 23-24, 2011  
Easter Sunday  
Luke 24.13-35

We are celebrating Easter this weekend. All over America churches are packed; choirs will sing; kids will eat chocolate bunnies; and families will gather together for dinner. Easter is a great religious holiday; a sweet family day; a major profit-making season for chocolate and jelly bean and plastic eggs and baskets and fake grass makers.

Now, I don't want to be misinterpreted in any way. I don't want to in any way diminish the value of religious celebrations or family gatherings or Easter's contribution to our economy. But I just want to begin by asking one question today: Is the Easter story true? That's all. Is the Easter story true? Why should we believe that a real person in history, Jesus of Nazareth, really died, really rose from the dead, and because he is alive can really change people's lives today? After all you and I weren't there. We weren't alive back 2000 years ago. So why should we believe the story of the resurrection? And even if Jesus, a real person in history, actually rose from the dead, what difference does it make for your life and mine?

Now, there is a way that we can know what happened in the past, or what happened in the present that we haven't personally experienced, with at least some degree of confidence. The way that we know about past or present events is through reliable eyewitnesses who tell us what happened. Eyewitness testimony is the way that we convict people of murder in this country and sentence them to life in prison, or even to death.

Let me tell you a story. On a May evening in 1981 a man by the name of Bobby Grant Lambert was murdered in a Safeway parking lot in Houston during an armed robbery. Another man named Gary Graham was charged with the crime of killing Bobby Lambert. During the trial Graham claimed that he didn't commit the crime, that he was somewhere else. And a friend of his provided an alibi saying that Graham was with him the whole time.

The problem for Graham's defense team was that there were 19 eyewitnesses who positively identified Graham as the perpetrator of a crime spree involving 3 kidnappings, 1 rape, 3 attempted murders, and the murder of Bobby Lambert.

What did the eyewitnesses say? Well, there was one Ms. Skilleren, who said that she saw Graham confront and accost Lambert in a parking lot at night. The crime scene was illuminated by two nearby parking lights. She watched Graham and Lambert struggle. Ms. Skilleren honked her horn, tried to stop the assault.

Graham then looked directly at her and shot Lambert killing him. Graham then walked away toward the front of Safeway. Ms. Skilleren followed him in her car never taking her eyes off of him. Graham walked right in front of Ms. Skilleren's car not 10 feet away and again turned and looked directly at her.

At the front of the store, Ms. Skilleren's headlights illuminated Graham's face. She then followed Graham for a few minutes and watched him take off. Ms. Skilleren picked Graham's picture out of a photo line up, and then picked him out of an actual line up. The Judge in the Lambert murder case stated that Ms. Skilleren was the most impressive and believable eyewitness he had ever encountered in 20 years of courtroom experience.

According to another eyewitness Graham told robbery victim, Rick Sanford, that he had already killed 6 people and that Sanford would be #7, if he did something stupid. Another eyewitness named Richard Carter, who also picked Graham out of a line up, said that Graham forced him to kneel down and he put a shotgun in his mouth saying, "I'll kill you, too." The court deputy said that he heard Graham say, "Next time I'm not going to leave any witnesses alive."

So the defense team had a bit of a problem trying to defend Gary Graham on the charge of murder in light of the 19 eyewitnesses who came forward and testified against Graham. And it was based on this eyewitness testimony that Graham was convicted of murder and executed in the State of Texas.

So what does any of this have to do with Easter? Well, getting back to the Easter story, why should we believe that Jesus of Nazareth, a real person in history, really died, really rose from the dead, and if he is alive, really changes people's lives today?

Well, we would believe these things about Jesus for the same reason that Gary Graham was convicted of murder. We believe these things about Jesus because of eyewitness testimony – the eyewitness testimony of people who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when Jesus lived, died, and rose again from the dead, and the eyewitness testimony of those whose lives the risen Christ has changed today.

This Easter weekend my message is titled “Eyewitnesses to the Resurrection.”  
Let's pray.

SLIDE Lk 24:13-35

13Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

14They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.

15As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;

16but they were kept from recognizing him.

17He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast.

18One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19“What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

20The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

21but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

22In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning

23but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.

24Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

25He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

26Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

27And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther.

29But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

30When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.

31Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

32They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

33They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together

34and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.”

35Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

So what do the eyewitnesses say about the resurrection of Jesus? We have to first consider

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The witness of scripture

Now, if this was a trial, the prosecution would first put on its case seeking to convict the Bible.

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The attack on the Bible

The other day I was talking with someone I met at a local coffee shop about Jesus and one of the first things they said was, “Well, I know that the Bible was put together by the Emperor Constantine, who because of his political concerns threw out a lot of books that offered a different perspective of Jesus. So I don’t know why you can trust what’s in the Bible.”

Now, this person I was talking to didn’t know very much about how the Bible was put together. Most folks don’t. But everywhere you turn these days – in the new book section at Barnes and Noble, in popular magazines, on the Discovery Channel, in college classrooms – you will hear the basic story that real historical Jesus of Nazareth was a charismatic teacher of justice and non-violence, and who because he provoked opposition from the government and from religious leaders was executed. And then following his death different viewpoints emerged from his followers about who he was. Some of his followers said that he was divine and raised from the dead. Others said that he was a human teacher of love and inclusiveness.

After a power struggle the divine Jesus party allied itself with the Roman government, suppressed and burned all the alternative texts regarding Jesus. And only recently have some of these texts emerged.

Dan Brown, the author of *The DaVinci Code* is claimed to have performed a great service for humanity by bringing us into the light about Christianity after 1700 years of conspiracy.

Now, this is a personal issue for me because I began to deal with this particular viewpoint as a 19 year old when I first took a class on the New Testament at my alma mater Case Western Reserve. What's actually happened in the last 30 years of scholarship is that *The DaVinci Code* conspiracy view of how the New Testament was formed is ridiculed in most scholarly circles even while it is becoming more popular in the press and in books like *The DaVinci Code*.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the author Anne Rice. She sold over 100 million books including a number of vampire novels. She was raised in a strict Catholic family and left the church at age 18 because she wanted to know why so many seemingly good people didn't practice organized religion yet were moral. She married a passionate atheist, Stan Rice, and was married to him for 41 years until he suddenly died of a brain tumor.

In 1998 because of a series of things that happened in her life, Anne returned to the Catholic Church. And for the first time in years, she began to study the Bible. In 2002 Anne Rice put everything aside and decided to confront the questions that had been dogging her her entire adult life. She made a decision to give herself entirely to the task of trying to understand who Jesus was and how



Christianity actually came to be. Anne Rice recently walked away from the Roman Catholic Church because she said it was too conservative and rigid. But she said she remains committed to Christ and to the Bible. Now why did Anne Rice return to faith in the Bible and what it says about Jesus?

She said in her book titled *Christ the Lord* that she read constantly for three years day and night almost anything and everything she could get her hands on concerning Jesus and the New Testament. Let me read to you from Anne Rice's book, *Christ the Lord*:

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*Having started with the skeptical critics, those who take their cue from the earliest New Testament scholars of the Enlightenment, I expected to discover that their arguments would be frightenly strong, and that Christianity was, at heart, a kind of fraud. I'd have to end up compartmentalizing my mind with faith in one part of it, and truth in another part of it. And what would I write about Jesus? I had no idea. But the prospects were interesting. Surely he was a liberal, married, had children, was a homosexual, and who knew what else? But I had to do my research before I wrote one word. These skeptical scholars seemed so sure of themselves. They built their books on certain assertions without even examining their assertions. How could they be wrong? I read and I read and I read. What gradually came clear to me was that...the arguments about Jesus were full of conjecture. Some books were no more than assumptions piled upon assumptions. Absurd conclusions were reached on the basis of little or no data*

*at all. In fact, the whole case for a non-divine Jesus who stumbled into Jerusalem and somehow got crucified by nobody and had nothing to do with the founding of Christianity and would be horrified by it, if he knew about it – that whole picture which had floated in the liberal circles I frequented as an atheist for 30 years – that case was not made. Not only was it not made, I discovered in this field some of the worst and most biased scholarship I had ever read.*

But as any good lawyer knows demonstrating that opposition witnesses are biased or that the opposition's case is weak doesn't prove that your own case is strong. Why should we believe that the Bible reliably reports what actually took place on that first Easter Sunday? Why should we believe that the Bible is a good source of information concerning whether or not Jesus rose from the dead?

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The reliability of the Bible

The first reason, as a former attorney and business law professor at Ohio State, that I believe the Bible's reports about that first Easter Sunday is that these reports are based upon eyewitness testimony.

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Based upon eyewitnesses

Now in a sermon I can only make a few brief remarks about this, but for any of you who wish to pursue the subject more thoroughly, the very best book on the subject of the eyewitness testimony contained in the gospels is a book by one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, Richard Bauckham. It is titled Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.

SLIDE - Jesus and the Eyewitnesses by Richard Bauckham

We have a few copies of it in our bookstore. It is a big book and is definitely not for everyone! But for a few of you, who like to wade through the very best of recent scholarship regarding the reliability of scripture there is probably no better book than Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.

On a more popular level, for the vast majority of folks, there is a nice smaller book written a few years ago titled The Case for Christ by Lee Stroebel.

SLIDE The Case for Christ by Lee Stroebel

Why should we believe that the Bible reliably communicates to us about who Jesus was, what he said, his crucifixion and most pertinent today, his resurrection? Because it is based on eyewitness accounts. Read with me in Luke.

SLIDE Lk 24:17-23

17He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast.

18One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19“What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

20The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

21but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

22In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning

23but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.

Now what Bauckham points out in his book and he marshals an enormous amount of historical evidence towards this end is that at the time the gospels were written, the four biographical accounts regarding Jesus – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – there were still very many well-known living eyewitnesses to Jesus’ teaching and life. Many of these named people were in the early churches and could serve as ongoing sources and guarantors of the truth of what

was being written in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Let me share a few examples.

In this account that we read about in Luke there is this man named Cleopas. Bauckham points out that he is almost certainly the same person as Clopas, whose wife, Mary, appears among the women at the cross in the book of John.

SLIDE Jn 19:25

25Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Clopas is a very, very rare Hebrew name. The Greek form of the name is Cleopas. And it is so rare that we can be virtually certain that this is the same Cleopas who, according to an early church historian, was the brother of Jesus' father, Joseph. In other words, Cleopas was Jesus' uncle. Not only Jesus' uncle, but Cleopas was the father of Simon, Jesus' first cousin, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church following the martyrdom of James, Jesus' brother.

The bottom line is this, Cleopas, the man we are reading about here in Luke 24, didn't just disappear into the mists of history. He remained active in the Jerusalem church and his son became the leader of the church. So there was an opportunity for people in the church to actually go to the folks about whom these

stories were written and ask them, “Did this really happen? Is this what happened to you, Cleopas?” “Simon, is this what your father told you – that he met Jesus on a road to Emmaus?”

See, this stuff is based on eyewitness testimony of people who were actually in the early churches, not made up people in a far away place at some other time. Let me just give you a couple of other illustrations that Bauckham raises in his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. He dozens of illustrations like this, but let me just give you a couple of others.

In the gospel of Mark we read about a man who helped Jesus carry Jesus’ cross. Jesus had been so beaten and bloodied by the Romans that he collapsed under the weight of the cross the Romans forced him to carry. And so the Romans required another man, a man by the name of Simon from the city of Cyrene, a city in modern Libya. The Romans forced this Simon from Cyrene to help carry the cross.

Now, Simon of Cyrene is mentioned in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. But Mark adds one little detail about Simon of Cyrene that you might miss, if you don’t understand its significance. Here is what we read in Mark.

SLIDE Mk 15:21

21A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Why does Mark add that little detail? Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus. It was not as if people would be confused and say, “Whoa, I thought you were talking about a different Simon from Cyrene. I’m glad you pointed out who he was. He’s the one who is the father of Alexander and Rufus.” The reason that Mark included this little detail is because Mark wrote his gospel to the Christians living in Rome and Alexander and Rufus were part of the church in Rome where he wrote. What Mark is saying here is that Alexander and Rufus, who are in your church, can vouch for the truth of what I’m writing in this gospel. You can ask them, “Is this what happened to your father? Was your father actually there carrying Jesus’ cross?”

See, we forget because we live at such a distance that the people about whom these stories were written came into the early church and people could ask them if the accounts written were actually true, if this was the way these happened. The apostle Paul appeals to eyewitness testimony of 500 eyewitnesses when he writes about the resurrection.

SLIDE 1 Co 15:3-8

3For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

4that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the  
Scriptures,

5and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

6After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at  
the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

7Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,

8and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Literally, Paul says there were 500 eyewitnesses who saw the Risen Christ.

Now, you can't write that in a document designed for public reading unless there  
really were surviving witnesses who were in the churches, who could confirm  
what the author wrote.

Not only were there supporters of Christ in the early churches who were still alive  
when this stuff was being written, there were also officials and opponents who  
actually heard him teach and who watched him die. They easily could have  
challenged any accounts that were fabricated.

As I said, Bauckham's book is just fascinating. He cites an early church leader  
named Papias, who said that when he was a young man one of the earliest  
followers of Jesus, a man by the name of Philip, who had four daughters that are  
mentioned in the book of Acts. This early church leader, Papias, said that these  
four daughters of Philip are mentioned in the Bible and were in his church. He



knew them. He talked with them. They were able to vouch for the accuracy of the stories.

But why else might we believe that the Bible is reliable other than the fact that it is based upon eyewitness testimony? Let me offer a second reason.

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Based upon embarrassing material

Or better stated, it contains embarrassing material. What do I mean?

I mean the gospels, the biographical accounts of Jesus, written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, contain a lot of material that if it wasn't true, should never have appeared if someone was just making up facts to support some new religion. A lot of what is in the gospels would have made the spread of Christianity more difficult for the early Christians, not easier. There is a lot of embarrassing material in the gospels that would have inhibited the spread of Christianity.

Like what? Like, start with the crucifixion. Why make up a story about Jesus being crucified, if it didn't happen? Any listener of the gospel either in the Jewish world, or in the Roman world, would have automatically suspected that Jesus

could never have been the Jewish Messiah, or the King of the world, because he ended up crucified. And we know who gets crucified – criminals.

Why make up the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging God, if there was some other way for him to accomplish his mission? If you're going to make up a story, just have him walk courageously right to the cross.

And why have your leader not only crucified, but on the cross asking God, why did God abandon him? Again, if you are going to make something up, why not put into the mouth of Jesus words like, "I trust in your Father, even while I'm hanging on the cross as I've always trusted in you. My faith remains unwavering." Why have him say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And why would you have the disciples, who were the early church leaders, the people spreading the message, look so – there is no other kind way to put it – look so stupid, so utterly unreliable, so disloyal, if you are going to make something up? I mean we're trying to teach people to be loyal to Jesus in the face of pressure and persecution, believe this message and follow through to the end, and what do you report about the leaders?

Well, you report that Peter, who was one of the chief leaders in the early church, denied Jesus when the chips were down. And they really didn't understand the message. And they repeatedly had to be rebuked.

There is just too much unhelpful, embarrassing material in the gospels for this whole thing to be made up. Why believe the Bible is reliable? Because it reports what happened, not what a propagandist, or a spin doctor, or a marketer or PR firm would claim happened when it really didn't happen. Why do I personally believe the Bible?

Well, I can tell you why I first came to faith in the Bible. It was because the Bible was

SLIDE

Based upon fulfilled prophecy

Read with me Luke 24.25-27,

SLIDE Lk 24:25-27

25He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

26Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

27And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

And then read Luke 24.44,

SLIDE Lk 24:44

44He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Most of you know that I am Jewish. For those of you who have not heard my story, I was raised in a conservative Jewish family in New York City. I went to Hebrew school and Hebrew high school. I was bar mitzvah. And one of the main reasons I came to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the Jewish Messiah was because of the dozens of prophecies in the Old Testament – that is dozens of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible about what Messiah would be like. In the Old Testament God spoke through the prophets so that the Jewish people would be able to recognize the Messiah when he came.

And as an 18 year old I remember being absolutely astounded when I read for the first time in my life that Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem, that Messiah was supposed to be born of a virgin, that’s in the Jewish Bible written by the prophet Isaiah. That Messiah was supposed to be betrayed by a close

friend. That Messiah would be sold for 30 pieces of silver. That Messiah would have his garments taken from him. That he would be beaten by Gentile soldiers. That he would have pieces of his beard pulled out. That he would be pierced. That he would die for the transgressions of people. That he would be laid in the borrowed grave of a rich man. And that he would rise from the dead.

All of this is in the Hebrew Bible written hundreds of years before Jesus ever came.

Now, you might ask

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Why don't Jewish people believe?

Why don't Jewish people believe that Jesus is the Messiah?

Maybe you've wondered that. Maybe you work with a Jewish friend, or you have a Jewish employee in your office, or you work for a Jewish boss, or you have a Jewish neighbor. How could it be, you think, that the Jewish people, God's own people, do not believe in Jesus as Messiah?

Now, this is a huge topic. Let me share with you just a few reflections. First of all, I always remind Jewish people when they say that Jews don't believe in

Jesus, I always remind Jewish people that all of the early followers of Jesus, all without exception, were Jewish. And we read in the New Testament that within a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection thousands of Jews believed in him. In fact, the question in the early church was not, "Can you be Jewish and believe in Jesus?" the question in the early church was, "How can you be a Gentile and be a follower of Jesus?" That's how Jewish the whole thing was.

And since those early days in the 1<sup>st</sup> century there's always been in very era many Jews who believe that Jesus, indeed, is the Jewish Messiah. Today it is estimated that there are about 200,000 Jewish people (and this is a very conservative estimate) – including American Jews, Russian Jews, Israeli Jews, people from orthodox Jewish backgrounds, conservative Jewish backgrounds, reformed Jewish backgrounds – who believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

You might say, "Rich, Jewish people read the Hebrew Bible, why don't they believe in Jesus?"

My answer would be that today Jewish people don't believe in Jesus for many of the same reasons that Gentiles don't believe in Jesus. Let me tick off a few reasons. It may be why you or a family member struggle to believe in Jesus. I say this with sadness, but the vast, vast majority of Jewish people are folks who are just like me when I was growing up in synagogue. I was largely ignorant of the Hebrew Bible. If you had said to me, "What about the prophecy in Isaiah,

Rich? Don't you believe that points to Jesus?" I would have said, "Isaiah, who? Isaiah Thomas, doesn't he play basketball?"

And this would be true of the vast, vast majority of non-Jews today who don't believe in Jesus. My experience in talking with thousands of people over the last 35 years, who don't believe in Jesus, is not that folks have read the Bible and have deeply considered the teachings of Jesus and the person of Jesus and after a great deal of deliberate considered reflection over many years have decided to reject Christ and his teaching. It is not that folks have looked deeply into this, thought about and reflected on Jesus and his life and then decided to reject him. It is that most people have never read the Bible, and know only bits and pieces that they've picked up here and there at church and through Sunday School lessons as a child and maybe through the Discovery Channel.

So why don't Jews believe about what the Hebrew Bible says about who the Messiah would be? The first reason would be ignorance of the Bible.

The second would be negative cultural and historical associations. When Jewish people today think about Jesus, he is associated with the way that so-called Christians have treated Jewish people for the last 2000 years whether we're talking about the Spanish Inquisition, or the Russian pogroms, or the anti-Semitism that is run through churches. For many Jewish people thinking about

Jesus and who he might be is not a cultural option. Why would I want to join up with people who have hated my people for centuries?

And you know, I think to a lesser degree, that this is the same problem that many non-Jewish people have with considering Jesus. Why would I want to join an organization that oppresses women, or is associated with this or that political party that I disagree with, or is anti-science, or anti-gay, racist or whatever? Negative cultural associations keep people from believing in Jesus.

Now, when I hear that kind of objection it is really tough for me as a church leader, as someone who has spent almost all of my adult life as a pastor. The one response I would make to the condemnation of Jesus by his association with certain Christians is to say that personal associations don't necessarily make a position true or not.

What I mean is that I might have a friend who is the sweetest person in the world. They're caring, kind and generous and they passionately believe that the world is flat. And I might know someone else who is the most generous person in the world would say has all the charm of Adolf Hitler. And this horrible person believes that the world is round. Now, just because I don't like someone, or don't like some of their views doesn't mean that everything they say is entirely false. And just because I like someone and enjoy their company doesn't mean that



everything they say is entirely true. Historical associations don't make something true or false.

And then I think that for a lot of Jewish people, and I would say for most non-Jewish people, there is an incredible misunderstanding regarding what a Christian is. Michael Brown, who got his Ph.D. at New York University, wrote a series of wonderful books titled Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus.

SLIDE Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus by Michael Brown

And one of the objections that he responded to in his book is the statement, "A person is either Jewish or Christian. I'm Jewish, so there's no way that I could ever become a Christian." Here is how Dr. Michael Brown helpfully responded to that objection. Here is what Dr. Brown wrote:

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*You're mixing apples with oranges. People are born Jewish or Gentile, but in order to become a Christian (or "Messianic") you must be born anew. This new birth comes through putting your faith in Jesus, the Messiah. Your sins are forgiven, you receive a new heart, and you become a follower of the Messiah. That's what it means to be Christian, or Messianic. But no one is born Christian. That's where the misconception lies. Nor is Christianity (or Messianic Judaism) merely another religion. Rather, it speaks of living relationship between God and*

*his people – both Jews and Gentiles – that takes place through faith in Jesus as Messiah. Through physical birth you are either a Jew or a Gentile; but through spiritual rebirth, you become a follower of Jesus the Messiah.*

See, most Gentiles think that I'm a Christian because well, I don't know, I'm not Jewish, I'm not Hindu. I've gone to church. As one preacher pointed out, "just because a kitten is born in a cookie jar doesn't make it a cookie." And just because you are raised in a church-going home doesn't make you a Christian. You become a follower of Jesus through a personal decision to surrender your life to him.

Why believe that Jesus is risen from the dead?

SLIDE

The witness of the resurrection

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist of War and Peace, once wrote this in his confession:

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*My question – that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man...a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: "What will come of what I am doing*

*today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why should I wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?*

What Tolstoy is saying is why does anything matter if we're going to die and rot in the ground? But you see, if Jesus rose from the dead, then everything changes.

I guess this is book recommendation day. But let me mention one other book to you. This book is specifically about the resurrection. It is titled Did the Resurrection Happen?

SLIDE Did the Resurrection Happen?

The book contains a very famous debate that took place a few years ago between a Christian philosopher named Gary Habermas and one of the world's leading modern philosophers, a man named Antony Flew, who for most of his life was a thorough-going atheist and he became a believer in God shortly before his death.

But the book, *Did the Resurrection Happen?*, is a debate between this Christian philosopher, Gary Habermas, and this formerly atheistic philosopher, Antony Flew, about the reality of the resurrection. Why should we believe it?

There are lots of reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Let me just tick off a few. First of all, as the liberal critic, Dominic Crossan, put it,

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*The crucifixion of Jesus is the best attested to fact in history.*

Dominic Crossan, who is a great critic of the Bible, said there is one fact about which virtually every scholar in the world agrees. And that is that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a cross and that he died. I mean you can't hardly get scholars to agree that the sun rose this morning. But there is virtually no reputable historian that you could find who would disagree with this simple fact: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and died on a cross.

Now, with that simple historically proven fact as a foundation, that Jesus was crucified and died, you have to come up with some way to account for four other facts:

#1 – The fact of the empty tomb. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then certainly one of the opponents to this message would have dragged out his dead body

from the tomb and said, “Here’s your risen Messiah – dead just like he was a week ago, a month ago, a year ago.” There is no doubt that Jesus’ tomb was empty.

#2 – A multitude of people like Cleopas here in Luke 24 and his companion, and Peter, James and John and the Apostle Paul and Mary Magdalene all of whom were in the early church, claimed that they saw Jesus alive and risen from the dead.

So, he was crucified – fact. A second indisputable fact is that his tomb was empty. A third indisputable fact is that there are numerous eyewitnesses who came forward to say that they saw Jesus raised from the dead. And a fourth indisputable fact is the birth of the early church shortly after Jesus died. You say, “What’s significant about that? So what?”

Here is what one scholar said:

#### SLIDE

*We need to remember that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century there were many other Messianic movements whose would-be messiahs were executed. However, in not one other single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero and leader had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries, whose*

*leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not a Jewish option. Unless, of course, he was.*

What this writer is saying is that there are dozens of other messianic pretenders whose lives and careers ended the same way Jesus' did. They ended up being killed. And what happened to their followers? They gave up following that leader, or they found some other movement to join.

The only group of people who did not give up following their leader after his death were the followers of Jesus. Why? What would lead the followers of Jesus to keep on following him after his crucifixion unless his crucifixion wasn't the end of the story. Unless they had seen him risen from the dead.

People have tried to come up with different alternative explanations to account for what may have happened following Jesus' crucifixion and death to try to account for the empty tomb, all of the eyewitness testimony, and the rise of this particular Messianic movement when every other one had given up – why this one continued. And friend, I've read all the alternative explanations and they don't hold a candle to the simple, startling conclusion that we read here in Luke 24.33-34,

SLIDE Lk 24:33-34

33They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together

34and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."

It is true! The Lord has risen.

Why believe that the story of Christ's resurrection on Easter is true? The witness of the scriptures, the witness of the resurrection. And finally,

SLIDE

The witness of changed lives

You know, most events in history, even if they're true, don't really change us. I could present you with a significant amount of evidence and prove to you that President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday in the year 1865. And even if you agreed, you might shrug your shoulders and say, "So what? How does that change my life?" There are lots of things that happen in history that you may believe occurred, but that have no impact on your life.

Friend, the resurrection of Jesus is not one of those irrelevant historical facts.

The resurrection of Jesus is one of those unique facts of history that if it is true,

and you take it on board in your life, it will change you forever. Because you see, if Jesus rose from the dead 2000 years ago and is alive today, it is possible for human beings right now to still meet him and to be changed by him. Just like Cleopas and his companion were changed by the risen Christ on that road to Emmaus 2000 years ago, so people today are changed.

And I just want to share with you a few contemporary eyewitnesses. I want to show you a video of a couple here at Vineyard Columbus, Ryan and Emily Hatfield, as they share with you their eyewitness testimony of encountering the Risen Christ.

VIDEO – Video of Ryan and Emily Hatfield

Does Jesus change lives today?

CARDBOARD TESTIMONIES

Gospel Call

NOTE: Baskets are at the back by the doors for the cards.



## **Eyewitnesses to the Resurrection**

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Rich Nathan  
April 23-24, 2011  
Easter Sunday  
Luke 24.13-35

### **I. The witness of scripture**

A. Attacks on the Bible

B. The reliability of the Bible

1. Based upon eyewitnesses
2. Based upon embarrassing material
3. Based upon fulfilled prophecy
4. Why don't Jewish people believe?

### **II. The witness of the resurrection**

### **III. The witness of changes lives**